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SIR MAURICE OLDFIELD

Former head of British Intelligence

Sir Maurice Oldfield, GCMG, CBE, who was head of MI6 from 1973 to 1978, died yesterday. He was 65. From late 1979 to the middle of last year he was security coordinator in Northern Ireland, but then asked to be relieved because of ill health.

Starting from a Derbyshire farm, where he was born on November 16, 1915, Maurice Oldfield won his way via Lady Manner's School, Bakewell, to Manchester University, where he gained a First in History in 1937, and an MA in 1938 for research into the position of the clergy in Parliament in the later Middle Ages.

Elected to a Fellowship at Manchester in the same year, he would have proceeded to a Doctorate and most probably a long and distinguished academic career, quite possibly with the international overtones suggested by his presidency of the British Universities' League of Nations Society, but his career was sharply changed by the Second World War. Enlisting in the Army, he became a sergeant in Field Security in Egypt, Palestine and Syria; he was commissioned in 1943, and promoted lieutenant-colonel in 1945. His talent for intelligence, which was recognized by an MBE in 1946, had been spotted by Brigadier Roberts then in charge of Field Security in the Middle East, who wrote of him: "He is the best counter-intelligence officer, both from the theoretical and practical point of view, that it has been my privilege to meet. He is quite outstanding."

Leaving the Army in 1947, Oldfield occupied a succession of posts in the Foreign Service both in London and abroad, particularly in South-East Asia where he was on the staff of the Commissioner-General for the United Kingdom in 1950-52. He became First Secretary in Singapore in 1956, adding to his reputation as the best all-round intelligence officer in the Foreign Service with a remarkable memory and an outstanding knowledge of South-East Asia.

He devoted much time to liaison with the Central Intelligence Agency, as the Americans dominated the post-war years; it was worth winning their confidence. Although this may have led him to be insufficiently critical of their work, his efforts were particularly relevant when he was posted to Washington in 1960 as MI6 liaison with the CIA and other United States intelligence agencies, where the wounds



caused by the Philby debacle took long to heal.

Oldfield was in fact "blown" in 1968 by Kim Philby's memoirs, where he was described as a "formidable". Following his return earlier to London in 1965, his standing in the inner circle of Whitehall and inside MI6 itself continued to grow, and in 1973 he was appointed as "C"—the head of MI6—and there was general satisfaction in the service that at last someone had been promoted from inside.

His main strength had been as Counter-Intelligence officer, rather than as an active procurer of information, and under him the service tended to become more organized and perhaps less active in the field. He discouraged initiatives of the "Special Operations" type; and while this could be criticized, he was certainly right to insist on never confusing intelligence with such doubtful operations as sabotage or assassination if an intelligence service is to be respected, as events in America were to show.

As head of MI6, Oldfield had direct access to the Prime Minister, or perhaps this might on occasion be better expressed as the Prime Minister having access to him, with the result that during Mr (now Sir) Harold Wilson's last term in office Oldfield was under pressure to pursue ministerial fears about nefarious operations by ill-wishers, both British and foreign.

Although he himself may have tended to be over-secretive, Oldfield's identity as the head of MI6 soon became public knowledge, and as a result he may have been the target of the IRA bomb planted in 1975 on the window sill of a restaurant in which he frequently dined; characteristically, he was unaffected by this experience, as he was equally unaffected by the later

embarrassment of having to lunch in the Athenaeum under the eye of personal security guards.

He commanded warm loyalty and affection at all levels in MI6, a reflection of his own attitude both to the service and to the individuals with whom he came into contact. He remained unchanged both by promotion and by honours where, starting with his MBE in 1946, these culminated in a GCMG in the Birthday Honours of 1978, the highest recognition ever accorded to a Head of the Secret Intelligence Service from which he had retired in the preceding January.

On retirement, he was made a Visiting Fellow of All Souls, where he proposed to research into the papers of Sir Mansfield Cumming, who was "C" from 1909 to 1923, on the history of Secret Intelligence from 1912 onwards; but the papers proved so rudimentary that he dropped the project in favour of continuing his earlier work on the medieval clergy. In the event, he was quickly brought out of retirement to act as Security Coordinator in Northern Ireland, where with his experience and equable temperament, he produced a great improvement in relations between the various intelligence agencies, both police and military, before he had to stand down in 1980 because of ill health. He was succeeded by Sir Brooks Richards.

An excellent companion and classless in outlook, Oldfield never married. His personal affections were for his family; father, mother, brothers, sisters, nephews and nieces. His main hobby was organ music, and he himself was a keen organist.

His penchant for good stories can be illustrated by one that he told of a retired MI6 officer who became a prison visitor and who was talking with a prisoner who had been convicted of burglary. It turned out that the prisoner had once had a job which involved repair work in the very offices of MI6, and he had taken the opportunity to "case the joint". He remarked to the visitor that it must be a queer organization that worked there, because people did not talk to one another in the lifts and they left nothing on their desks. "Nothing worth nicking there, governor?" the prisoner summarized—and Oldfield said that if he ever wrote his autobiography, "Nothing worth nicking" would be its title.

His modesty was genuine, and his charm natural. And in his ability, integrity and humanity combined to make him a most trustworthy anchor for the Intelligence Service to which he devoted so much of his life.